

EVERY STORY HAS A DARK SIDE

A
FIRST
IN LINE
PICK OF THE
MONTH

UNFORGIVEN

⌘ A FALLEN NOVEL ⌘

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LAUREN KATE

AN EXCLUSIVE  SNEAK PEEK . . .

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UNFORGIVEN

 A FALLEN NOVEL 

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KEEP READING FOR A SNEAK PEEK....

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DEAR READERS,

The coolest, strangest thing about writing a series is that dialogue and details, written in a spirit of experimentation, become fixed once a book is printed. Sometimes I have to revisit my books to relearn rules I invented.

Five years ago, three books into the Fallen series, I set a scene on the Jordan River circa 1000 BCE, featuring my favorite character, Cam. It was a break-up scene, full of vitriolic heat—a fragment of a romance, a lens through which to see the relationship of Luce and Daniel, whose love so consumed its context it left space for little else.

I didn't know Lilith then. I didn't understand why Cam loved her.

I certainly didn't know that these four pages in *Passion*—pulled down from my office shelf to answer a reader's question last summer—would inspire a new Fallen novel.

This is a rock-and-roll story, a second-chances story, the villain's side of the story (the villain's always the hero of another tale)—and above all, a testament to the powerful experiment of love.

Many of you have asked me: What happened to Cam? A part of me must have always known I would return to my most enigmatic character. I think you knew it, too. This story is for you.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "James Kate". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first name "James" written in a larger, more prominent hand than the last name "Kate".

ALSO BY LAUREN KATE



THE FALLEN SERIES

Fallen

Torment

Passion

Rapture

Fallen in Love



THE TEARDROP SERIES

Teardrop

Waterfall



The Betrayal of Natalie Hargrove

ONE



WASTELAND

LILITH

Lilith woke up coughing.

It was wildfire season—it was always wildfire season—and her lungs were thick with smoke and ash from the red blaze in the hills.

Her bedside clock flashed midnight, but her thin white curtains glowed gray with dawn. The power must be out again. She thought of the biology test awaiting her in fourth period, followed immediately by the sucky fact that last night she'd brought home her American history book by mistake. Whose idea of a cruel joke was it to assign her two textbooks with precisely the same color spine? She was going to have to wing the test and pray for a C.

She slid out of bed and stepped in something warm and soft. She drew her foot up, and the smell assaulted her.

“Alastor!”

The little blond mutt trotted into her bedroom, thinking Lilith wanted to play. Her mom called the dog a genius because of the tricks Lilith’s brother, Bruce, had taught him, but Alastor was four years old and refused to learn the only trick that mattered: being housebroken.

“This is seriously uncivilized,” she scolded the dog, and hopped on one foot into the bathroom. She turned on the shower.

Nothing.

Water off till 3 p.m. her mom’s note proclaimed on a sheet of loose-leaf taped to the bathroom mirror. The tree roots outside were curling through their pipes, and her mom was supposed to have money to pay the plumber this afternoon, after she got a paycheck from one of her many part-time jobs.

Lilith groped for toilet paper, hoping at least to wipe her foot clean. She found only a brown cardboard tube. Just another Tuesday. The details varied, but every day of Lilith’s life was more or less the same degree of awful.

She tore her mom’s note from the mirror and used it to wipe her foot, then dressed in black jeans and a thin black T-shirt, not looking at her reflection. She tried to remember a single shred of what her biology teacher had said might be on the test.

By the time she got downstairs, Bruce was tilting the remains of the cereal box into his mouth. Lilith knew those stale flakes were the last morsels of food in the house.

“We’re out of milk,” Bruce said.

“And cereal?” Lilith said.

“And cereal. And everything.” Bruce was eleven and nearly as tall as Lilith, but much slighter. He was sick. He had always been sick. He was born too soon, with a heart that couldn’t keep up with his soul, Lilith’s mother liked to say. Bruce’s eyes were sunken and his skin had a bluish tint because his lungs could never get enough air. When the hills were on fire, like they were every day, he wheezed at the smallest exertion. He stayed home in bed more often than he went to school.

Lilith knew Bruce needed breakfast more than she did, but her stomach still growled in protest. Food, water, basic hygiene products—everything was scarce in the dilapidated dump they called home.

She glanced through the grimy kitchen window and saw her bus pulling away from the stop. She groaned, grabbing her guitar case and her backpack, making sure her black journal was inside.

“Later, Bruce,” she called, and took off.

Horns blared and tires squealed as Lilith sprinted across the street without looking, like she always told Bruce not to do. Despite her terrible luck, she never worried about dying. Death would mean freedom from the panicked hamster wheel of her life, and Lilith knew she wasn’t that

lucky. The universe or God or *something* wanted to keep her miserable.

She watched the bus rumble off, and then started walking the three miles to school with her guitar case bouncing against her back. She hurried across her street, past the strip mall with the dollar store and the drive-through Chinese place that was always going in and out of business. Once she got a few blocks beyond her own gritty neighborhood, known around town as the Slump, the sidewalks smoothed out and the roads had fewer potholes. The people who stepped outside to get their papers were wearing business suits, not the ratty bathrobes Lilith's neighbors often wore. A well-coiffed woman walking her Great Dane waved good morning, but Lilith didn't have time for pleasantries. She ducked through the concrete pedestrian tunnel that ran beneath the highway.

Trumbull Preparatory School sat at the corner of High Meadow Road and Highway 2—which Lilith mostly associated with stressful trips to the emergency room when Bruce got really sick. Speeding down the pavement in her mother's purple minivan, her brother wheezing faintly against her shoulder, Lilith always gazed out the window at the green signs on the side of the highway, marking the miles to other cities. Even though she hadn't seen much—anything—outside of Crossroads, Lilith liked to imagine the great, wide world beyond it. She liked to think that someday, if she ever graduated, she'd escape to a better place.

The late bell was ringing when she emerged from the tunnel near the edge of campus. She was coughing, her eyes burning. The smoldering wildfires in the hills that encircled her town wreathed the school in smoke. The brown stucco building was ugly, and made even uglier by its papering of student-made banners. One advertised tomorrow's basketball game, another spelled out the details for the after-school science fair meeting, but most of them featured blown-up yearbook photos of some jock named Dean who was trying to win votes for prom king.

At Trumbull's main entrance stood Principal Tarkenton. He was barely over five feet tall and wore a burgundy polyester suit.

"Late again, Ms. Foscor," he said, studying her with distaste. "Didn't I see your name on yesterday's detention list for tardiness?"

"Funny thing about detention," Lilith said. "I seem to learn more there staring at the wall than I ever have in class."

"Get to first period," Tarkenton said, taking a step toward Lilith, "and if you give your mother one second of trouble in class today—"

Lilith swallowed. "My mom's here?"

Her mom substituted a few days a month at Trumbull, earning a tuition waiver that was the only reason she could afford to send Lilith to the school. Lilith never knew when she might find her mom waiting ahead of her

in the cafeteria line or blotting her lipstick in the ladies' room. She never told Lilith when she would be gracing Trumbull's campus, and she never offered her daughter a ride to school.

It was always a horrible surprise, but at least Lilith had never walked in on her mother substituting in one of her own classes.

Until today, it seemed. She groaned and headed inside, wondering which of her classes her mom would turn up in.

She was spared in homeroom, where Mrs. Richards had already finished the roll and was furiously writing on the board about ways students could help with her hopeless campaign to bring recycling to campus. When Lilith walked in, the teacher shook her head wordlessly, as if she were simply bored by Lilith's habitual lateness.

She slid into her seat, dropped her guitar case at her feet, and took out the biology book she'd just grabbed from her locker. There were ten precious minutes left in homeroom, and Lilith needed them all to cram for her test.

"Mrs. Richards," the girl next to Lilith said, glaring in her direction. "Something suddenly smells awful in here."

Lilith rolled her eyes. She and Chloe King had been enemies since day one of elementary school, though she couldn't remember why. It wasn't like Lilith was any kind of threat to the rich, gorgeous senior. Chloe modeled for

Crossroads Apparel and was the lead singer of a pop band called the Perceived Sights, not to mention the president of at least half of Trumbull's extracurricular clubs.

After more than a decade of Chloe's nastiness, Lilith was used to the constant rain of attacks. On a good day, she ignored them. Today she focused on the genomes and phonemes in her bio book and tried to tune Chloe out.

But now the other kids around Lilith were pinching their noses. The kid in front of her mimed a retching motion.

Chloe swiveled in her seat. "Is that your cheap idea of perfume, Lilith, or did you just crap your pants?"

Lilith remembered the mess Alastor had left by her bedside and the shower she hadn't been able to take, and felt her cheeks burn. She grabbed her things and bolted from the classroom, ignoring Mrs. Richards's ravings about a hall pass, and ducked into the closest bathroom.

Inside, alone, she leaned against the red door and closed her eyes. She wished she could hide in here all day, but she knew once the bell rang, this place would be flooded with students. She forced herself to the sink. She turned on the hot water, kicked off her shoe, raised her offending foot into the basin, and pumped the cheap pink soap dispenser. She glanced up, expecting to see her sad reflection, and instead she found a glittery poster taped over the mirror. *Vote King for Queen*, it read below a professional head shot of a beaming Chloe King.

Prom was later this month, and the anticipation seemed to consume every other kid at school. Lilith had seen a hundred of these kinds of posters in the halls. She'd walked behind girls showing each other pictures of their dream corsages on their phones on their way to class. She'd heard the boys joke about what happened after prom. All of it made Lilith gag. Even if she had money for a dress, and even if there were a guy she actually wanted to go with, there was no way she would ever set foot in her high school when she wasn't legally required to be there.

She tore Chloe's poster from the mirror and used it to clean the inside of her shoe, then tossed it into the sink, letting the water run over it until Chloe's face was nothing but wet pulp.



In poetry, Mr. Davidson was so engrossed in writing Shakespeare's Sonnet 20 on the board that he didn't even notice Lilith come in late.

She sat down cautiously, watching the other kids, waiting for someone to hold their nose or gag, but luckily they only seemed to notice Lilith as a means for passing notes. Paige, the sporty blond girl to Lilith's left, would nudge her, then slide a folded note onto her desk. It wasn't labeled, but Lilith knew, of course, that it wasn't meant for her. It was for Kimi Grace, the cool half Korean, half

Mexican girl sitting to her right. Lilith had passed enough notes between these two to glimpse snatches of their plans for prom—the epic after-party and the sick stretch limo they were pooling their allowances to hire. Lilith had never been given an allowance. If her mom had any cash to spare, it went straight to Bruce’s medical bills.

“Right, Lilith?” Mr. Davidson asked, making Lilith flinch. She shoved the note under her desk so she wouldn’t get caught.

“Could you say that again?” Lilith asked. She really did not want to piss off Mr. Davidson. Poetry was the only class she liked, mostly because she wasn’t failing it, and Mr. Davidson was the only teacher she’d ever met who seemed to enjoy his job. He’d even liked some of the song lyrics Lilith had turned in as poetry assignments. She still had the loose-leaf paper on which Mr. Davidson had written simply *Wow!* beneath the lyrics for a song she called “Exile.”

“I said you’ve signed up for the open mic, I hope?” Davidson asked.

“Yeah, sure,” she mumbled, but she hadn’t and hoped not to. She didn’t even know when it was.

Davidson smiled, pleased and surprised. He turned to the rest of the class. “Then we all have something to look forward to!”

As soon as Davidson turned back to his board, Kimi Grace nudged Lilith. When Lilith met Kimi’s dark, pretty

eyes, she wondered for a moment if Kimi wanted to talk about the open mic, if the idea of reading in front of an audience made her nervous, too. But all Kimi wanted from Lilith was the folded note in her hand.

Lilith sighed and passed it to her.

She tried to skip gym to study for her bio test, but of course she got caught and ended up having to do laps in her gym uniform and her combat boots. The school didn't issue tennis shoes, and her mom never had the cash to get her any, so the sound of her feet, running circles around the other kids who were playing volleyball in the gym, was deafening.

Everyone was looking at her. No one had to say the word *freak* out loud. She knew they were thinking it.

By the time Lilith made it to biology, she was beat down and worn out. And that was where she found her mom, wearing a lime-green skirt, her hair in a tight bun, handing out the tests.

"Just perfect," Lilith said with a groan.

"Shhhhhh!" a dozen students replied.

Her mom was tall and dark, with an angular beauty. Lilith was fair, her hair as red as the fire in the hills. Her nose was shorter than her mother's, her eyes and mouth less fine. Their cheekbones sat at different angles.

Her mom smiled. "Won't you please take a seat?"

As if she didn't even know her daughter's name.

But her daughter knew hers. "Sure thing, Janet," Lilith

said, dropping into an empty desk in the row nearest the door.

Her mom's angry gaze flicked to Lilith's face; then she smiled and looked away.

Kill them with kindness was one of her mom's favorite sayings, at least in public. At home, she wore a harsher manner. All that her mom loathed about her life she blamed on Lilith, because Lilith had been born when her mom was nineteen and beautiful, on her way to a remarkable future. By the time Bruce came along, her mom had recovered enough from the trauma of Lilith to become an actual mother. The fact that their dad was out of the picture—no one knew where he was—gave her mother all the more reason to live for her son.

The first page of the biology test was a grid in which they were expected to map dominant and recessive genes. The girl to her left was rapidly filling in boxes. Suddenly Lilith could not remember a single thing she had learned all year. Her throat itched, and she could feel the back of her neck begin to sweat.

The door to the hallway was open. It had to be cooler out there. Almost before she knew what she was doing, Lilith was standing in the doorway, her backpack in one hand, her guitar case in the other.

"Leaving class without a hall pass is an automatic detention!" Janet called. "Lilith, put down that guitar and come back here!"

Lilith's experience with authority had taught her to listen carefully to what she was told—and then do the opposite.

She bumped down the hall and hit the door running.



Outside, the air was white and hot. Ash twisted down from the sky, drifting onto Lilith's hair and the brittle gray-green grass. The most inconspicuous way to leave school grounds was through one of the exits beyond the cafeteria, which led out to a small area of gravel where kids ate lunch when the weather was okay. The area was "secured" with a flimsy chain-link fence that was easy enough to climb over.

She made it over the fence, then stopped herself. What was she doing? Bailing on an exam proctored by her own mother was a horrible idea. There would be no escaping punishment. But it was too late now.

If she kept going this way, she'd end up back at her rusting, peeling eyesore of a house. No thanks. She gazed up at the few cars zipping across the highway, then turned and crossed the parking lot on the west side of campus, where the carob trees grew thick and tall. She entered the little forest and moved toward the shady, hidden edge of Rattlesnake Creek.

She ducked between two heavy branches on the bank

and let out her breath. Sanctuary. Sort of. This was what passed for nature, anyway, in the tiny town of Crossroads.

Lilith rested her guitar case in its customary place in the crook of a tree trunk, kicked up her feet atop a heap of crisp orange leaves, and let the sound of the creek trickling in its cement bed relax her.

At school she'd seen pictures of "beautiful" places in her textbooks—Niagara Falls, Mount Everest, waterfalls in Hawaii—but she liked Rattlesnake Creek better than any of those because she didn't know a soul beside herself who thought this little grove of withered trees was beautiful.

She opened her case and took out the guitar. It was a dark orange Martin 000-45 with a crack slanted down its body. Someone on her street had thrown it away, and Lilith couldn't afford to be picky. Besides, she thought the flaw made the instrument sound richer.

Her fingers strummed the strings, and as chords filled the air, she felt an invisible hand smoothing her rough edges. When she played, she felt surrounded by friends she didn't have.

What would it be like to meet someone who actually shared her taste in music? she wondered. Someone who didn't think the Four Horsemen sang "like whipped dogs," as a cheerleader had once described Lilith's favorite band. It was Lilith's dream to see them play live, but it was impossible to imagine actually attending a Four Horsemen

show. They were too big to play Crossroads. Even if they did come here, how could Lilith afford a ticket when her family barely had enough money for food?

She didn't notice when she tumbled into a song. It wasn't fully formed yet—just her sorrow melding with her guitar—but a few minutes later, when she stopped singing, someone behind her started clapping.

"Whoa." Lilith spun around to face a black-haired boy leaning against a nearby tree. He wore a leather jacket, and his black jeans disappeared into scuffed combat boots.

"Hey," he said as if he knew her.

Lilith didn't answer. They *didn't* know each other. Why was he talking to her?

He studied her intensely, his gaze penetrating. "You're still beautiful," he said softly.

"You're . . . really creepy," Lilith replied.

"You don't recognize me?" He sounded disappointed.

Lilith shrugged. "I don't watch *America's Most Wanted*."

The boy looked down, laughed, then nodded at her guitar. "Aren't you afraid of making that worse?"

She flinched, confused. "My song?"

"Your song was a revelation," he said, pushing off the tree and walking toward her. "I mean that crack in your guitar."

Lilith watched the easy way he moved—coolly, slowly, as if no one had ever made him feel insecure about

anything in his life. He stopped right in front of her and slid a canvas bag from his shoulder. The strap landed on Lilith's boot and she stared at it, as if the boy had put it there, touching her, intentionally. She kicked it off.

"I'm careful." She cradled her guitar. "Right now, the ratio of guitar to crack is just right. If it ever became more crack than guitar, then it would be worse."

"Sounds like you have it all figured out." The boy stared at her long enough for Lilith to grow uncomfortable. His eyes were a spellbinding green. He clearly wasn't from around here. Lilith didn't know if she'd ever met anyone who wasn't from Crossroads.

He was gorgeous and intriguing, and therefore too good to be true. She hated him immediately. "This is my spot. Find your own," she said.

But instead of going away, he sat down. Next to her. Close. Like they were friends. Or more than friends. "Do you ever play with anyone else?" the boy asked.

He tilted his head, and Lilith caught a glimpse of a starburst tattoo on his neck. She realized she was holding her breath.

"What, music? Like a band?" She shook her head. "No. Not that it's any of your business." This guy was invading her turf, interrupting the only real time she had to herself. She wanted him gone.

"What do you think of The Devil's Business?" he asked.

“What?”

“As a band name.”

Lilith’s instinct was to get up and walk away, but nobody ever talked to her about music. “What kind of band is it?” she asked.

He picked up a carob leaf from the ground and studied it, twirling its stem between his fingers. “You tell me. It’s your band.”

“I don’t have a band,” she said.

He raised a dark eyebrow. “Maybe it’s time you got one.”

Lilith had never dared allow herself to dream of what it might be like to play in an actual band. She shifted her weight to put more space between them.

“My name’s Cam.”

“I’m Lilith.” She wasn’t sure why telling this boy her name felt so monumental, but it did. She wished he weren’t here, that he hadn’t heard her play. She didn’t share her music with anyone.

“I love that name,” Cam said. “It suits you.”

Now it really was time to leave. She didn’t know what this guy wanted, but it definitely wasn’t anything good. She picked up her guitar and got to her feet.

Cam went to stop her. “Where are you going?”

“Why are you talking to me?” she asked. Something about him made her blood boil. Why was he horning in on her private space? Who did he think he was? “You don’t know me. Leave me alone.”

Lilith's bluntness usually made people uncomfortable. But not this guy. He laughed a little under his breath.

"I'm talking to you because you and your song are the most interesting things I've stumbled upon in ages."

"Your life must be really boring," Lilith said.

She started to walk away. She had to stop herself from looking back. Cam didn't ask where she was going or seem surprised that she was leaving in the middle of their conversation.

"Hey," he called.

"Hey what?" Lilith didn't even turn around. Cam was the kind of boy who hurt girls foolish enough to let him. And she didn't need any more hurt in her life.

"I play guitar, too," he said as she started back through the forest. "All we'd need is a drummer."

TWO



DEAD SOULS

CAM

Cam watched Lilith disappear into the woods of Rattlesnake Creek, suppressing an overwhelming urge to race after her. She was as magnificent as she had been in Canaan, with the same bright, expressive soul shining through her outer beauty. He was amazed, and massively relieved, because when he'd discovered the shocking news that Lilith's soul was not in Heaven, as he'd expected, but in Hell with Lucifer, Cam had imagined the worst.

It was Annabelle who'd finally told him. He'd gone to her thinking she could slip him some details about Lilith's state in Heaven. The pink-haired angel had shaken her head and looked so sad when she pointed down, *way* down, and said to him, "You didn't know?"

Cam burned with questions about how Lilith—pure, kind Lilith—had ended up in Hell, but the most important one was this: Was she still the girl he loved, or had Lucifer broken her?

Five minutes with her had brought him right back to Canaan, to the breathtaking love they'd once known. Being next to her had filled him with hope. Except—

There was something different about Lilith. She wore a razor-sharp bitterness like a coat of armor.

“Enjoying yourself?” The voice came from somewhere above him.

Lucifer.

“Thanks for the glimpse,” Cam said. “Now get her out of here.”

Warm laughter shook the trees. “You came to me begging to know the state of her soul,” Lucifer said. “I offered to let you visit her—but only because you’re one of my favorites. Now why don’t we talk business?”

Before Cam could respond, the ground dropped out from underneath him. His stomach hurtled upward, a sensation only the devil could trigger, and as Cam plunged down, he pondered the limits of angelic strength. He rarely questioned his instincts, but this instinct, to love Lilith and be loved by her again—powerful as it was—would either require the devil’s clemency or would pit Cam directly against Lucifer. He unpinning his wings and looked down as a blue spot grew and sharpened beneath his feet. He landed on a linoleum floor.

The forest and Rattlesnake Creek were gone, and Cam found himself standing in the center of a food court in a deserted mall. He folded his wings against his sides and took a seat on a stool at an orange laminate table.

The food court atrium was huge, filled with a hundred ugly tables identical to his. It was impossible to tell where it began and where it ended. A long skylight spanned the ceiling, but it was so dirty, Cam could see nothing beyond the gray grime coating its glass. The floor was strewn with trash—empty plates, greasy napkins, crushed to-go cups and their chewed-on plastic straws. A stale odor hung in the air.

Around him were typical vendors—Chinese food, pizza, wings—but the stores were all run-down: the burger place was shuttered, the lights of the sandwich shop were burned out, and the glass case at the yogurt stop was smashed. Only one vendor's lights were on. Its awning was black with the word *Aevum* spelled out in bold gold letters.

A youthful figure with wavy auburn hair stood behind its counter, wearing a white T-shirt, jeans, and a flat white chef's hat. He was cooking something Cam couldn't see.

The devil's post-Fall guise could be anything, but Cam always recognized Lucifer by the searing heat that emanated from him. Though twenty feet separated them, it felt like Cam was standing right over a hot grill.

"Where are we?" Cam called.

Lucifer glanced over and gave Cam a strange, alluring smile. He had the face of a handsome, charismatic twenty-two-year-old, a dusting of freckles on his nose.

“This is Aevum—sometimes referred to as Limbo,” the devil said, picking up a large spatula. “It is a state of being between time and eternity, and I’m running a special for first-time customers.”

“I’m not hungry,” Cam said.

Lucifer’s wild eyes sparkled as he used the spatula to flip something sizzling onto a brown cafeteria tray. Then he moved behind a beige cash register and raised the plastic divider separating the little kitchen from the food court.

He rolled his shoulders and released his wings, which were huge and stiff and greenish-gold, like ancient, tarnished jewelry. Cam held his breath against their repulsive, musty smell and the tiny black damned critters that scuttled and nested in the folds.

With the cafeteria tray held high, Lucifer approached Cam. He narrowed his eyes at Cam’s wings, where the fissure of white still glowed against the gold. “White’s not a good color on you. Something you want to tell me?”

“What’s she doing in Hell, Lucifer?”

Lilith had been one of the most virtuous people Cam had ever known. He couldn’t fathom how she could ever have become one of Lucifer’s subjects.

“You know I can’t betray a confidence.” Lucifer smiled

and set the plastic tray down in front of Cam. On it was a tiny snow globe with a golden base.

“What is this?” he asked. Dark gray ash filled the snow globe. It fell ceaselessly, magically, nearly obscuring the tiny lyre floating inside.

“See for yourself,” Lucifer said. “Turn it over.”

He turned the globe upside down and found a little golden knob at its base. He wound it and let the lyre’s music wash over him. It was the same melody he’d been humming since he flew away from Troy: Lilith’s song. That was how he thought of it.

He closed his eyes and was back on the riverbank in Canaan, three millennia ago, listening to her play.

This cheap music-box version was more piercing than Cam could have anticipated. His fingers tensed around the globe. Then—

Pop.

The snow globe shattered. The music dwindled as blood trickled down Cam’s palm.

Lucifer tossed him a reeking gray dishrag and gestured for him to clean up the mess. “Lucky for you I have so many.” He nodded at the table behind Cam. “Go ahead, try another. Each one’s a little different!”

Cam set down the shards of the first snow globe, wiped his hands, and watched the cuts in his palms heal. Then he turned and looked again at the food court: in the center of each of the once-empty orange tables was a snow

globe atop a brown plastic tray. The number of tables in the food court had grown—there was now a sea of them, stretching into the dim distance.

Cam reached for the globe on the table behind him.

“Gently,” Lucifer said.

Inside this globe was a tiny violin. Cam turned the knob and heard a different version of the same bittersweet song.

The third globe contained a miniature cello.

Lucifer sat down and kicked his feet up as Cam moved around the food court, winding each snow globe into music. There were sitars, harps, violas. Lap steel guitars, balalaikas, mandolins—each one playing an ode to Lilith’s broken heart. “These globes . . .,” Cam said slowly. “They represent all the different Hells you’ve trapped her in.”

“And every time she dies in one of them,” Lucifer said, “she ends up back here, where she is reminded anew of your betrayal.” He stood and paced the aisles between tables, taking in his creations with pride. “And then, to keep things interesting, I banish her to a new Hell crafted especially for her.” Lucifer grinned, exposing rows of razor-sharp teeth. “I really can’t say what’s worse—the endless Hells I subject her to again and again, or having to come back here and remember how much she hates you. But that’s what keeps her going—her anger and her hatred.”

“Of me.” Cam swallowed.

“I work with the material I’m given. It’s not my fault

you betrayed her.” Lucifer let out a laugh that made Cam’s eardrums pulse. “Want to know my favorite twist in Lilith’s current Hell? No weekends! School every day of the year. Can you imagine?” Lucifer lifted a snow globe into the air, then let it fall to the ground and shatter. “As far as she’s concerned, she’s a typically gloomy teenager, suffering through a typically gloomy high school experience.”

“Why Lilith?” Cam asked. “Do you craft everyone’s Hell this way?”

Lucifer smiled. “The dull ones make their own dull hells, fire and brimstone and all that crap. They need no help from me. But Lilith—she’s special. Not that I have to tell you that.”

“What about the people suffering with her? Those kids at her school, her family—”

“Pawns,” Lucifer said. “Brought here from Purgatory to play a bit part in someone else’s story—which is a hell of another sort.”

“I don’t get it,” Cam said. “You’ve made her existence utterly miserable—”

“Oh, I can’t take all the credit,” Lucifer said. “You helped!”

Cam ignored the guilt he felt lest it choke him. “But you’ve allowed her one thing she dearly loves. Why do you let her play music?”

“Existence is never so miserable as when you have a

taste of something beautiful,” Lucifer said. “It serves to remind you of everything you can never have.”

Everything you can never have.

Luce and Daniel had shaken something loose in Cam, something he thought was lost for good: his ability to love. The realization that such a thing was possible for him, that he might have a second chance, had made him yearn to see Lilith.

Now that he had, now that he knew she was here . . .

He had to *do* something.

“I need to see her again,” Cam said. “That was too short—”

“I’ve done you enough favors,” Lucifer said with a snarl. “I showed you what eternity is like for her. I didn’t have to do even that.”

Cam scanned the endless snow globes. “I can’t believe you hid all this from me.”

“I didn’t hide her; you didn’t care,” Lucifer said. “You were always too busy. Luce and Daniel, the popular crowd at Sword and Cross, all that jazz. But now . . . well, would you like to see some of Lilith’s previous Hells? It’ll be fun.”

Without waiting for an answer, Lucifer put his palm on the back of Cam’s head and pushed it at one of the snow globes. Cam squeezed his eyes shut, bracing for his face to smash into the glass—

Instead:

He stood with Lucifer beside a vast river delta. Torrential rain poured from the sky. People ran from a row of huts, clutching belongings, panic on their faces as the river swelled against its banks. Across the river, a girl with a sad, calm expression walked slowly, carrying a sitar, in stark contrast to the chaos around her. Though she looked nothing like the Lilith he had loved in Canaan or the girl he had just met in Crossroads, Cam recognized her instantly.

She was walking *toward* the surging river.

“Ah, Lilith,” Lucifer said with a sigh. “She really knows when to pack it in.”

She sat in the mud on the riverbank and began to play. Her hands flew over the long-necked instrument, producing sad, sonorous music.

“A blues for drowning,” Lucifer said with a hint of admiration.

“No—it’s a blues for the moments before drowning,” Cam said. “Big difference.”

Then the river was over its banks, over Lilith and her sitar, over the houses, over the heads of all the fleeing people, over Cam and Lucifer.

Seconds later, Cam and Lucifer stood on a mountain bluff. Wisps of fog curled like fingers around the pine trees.

“This is one of my favorites,” Lucifer said.

Mournful banjo music sounded behind them. They

turned and saw seven rail-thin children sitting on the porch of a sagging log cabin. They were barefoot, and their stomachs were bloated. A girl with strawberry-blond hair held the banjo in her lap, her fingers moving over the strings.

“I’m not going to stand here and watch Lilith play along to her starvation,” Cam said.

“It’s not so bad—it’s just like going to sleep,” Lucifer said.

The smallest boy now appeared to be doing just that. One of his sisters laid her head on his shoulder and followed suit. Then Lilith stopped playing and closed her eyes.

“That’s enough,” Cam said.

He thought about the Lilith he’d just encountered at Rattlesnake Creek. All this past suffering, the imprint of all these deaths, was in her somewhere, but she had no conscious memory of it. Just like Luce.

No, he realized, Lilith was nothing like Luce. They were as far from each other as east from west. Luce had been an archangel, living a cursed mortal life. Lilith was a mortal cursed by immortal influences, blown across the universe by eternal winds she could not perceive. But she felt those winds nonetheless. They were there in the way she sang with her eyes closed and strummed her cracked guitar.

She was doomed. Unless . . .

“Send me back in,” Cam said to the devil. They were back in Hell’s food court, snow globes atop the tables everywhere Cam looked, each one full of Lilith’s pain.

“You liked Crossroads that much?” Lucifer asked. “I’m touched.”

He looked deep into the devil’s eyes and shuddered at the wildness he found there. All this time, Lilith had been under Lucifer’s spell. *Why?* “What would it take to make you release her?” Cam asked Lucifer. “I’ll do anything.”

“*Anything?* I like the sound of that.” Lucifer slid his hands into his back pockets, tilted his head, and stared at Cam, considering. “Lilith’s current Hell is set to expire in fifteen days. I’d enjoy watching you make her even more miserable for those two weeks.” He paused. “We could make it interesting.”

“You have a bad habit of making things interesting,” Cam said.

“A wager,” Lucifer proposed. “If, in the fifteen days remaining, you can cleanse Lilith’s dark heart of her hatred for you and convince her to fall in love with you again—truly fall in love—I’ll close up shop, at least where she’s concerned. No more bespoke Hells for her.”

Cam narrowed his eyes. “It’s too easy. What’s the catch?”

“Easy?” Lucifer repeated, cackling. “Didn’t you notice the gigantic chip on her shoulder? That’s all you. She hates you, pal.” He blinked. “And she doesn’t even know why.”

“She hates that miserable world,” Cam said. “Anyone would. That doesn’t mean she hates me. She doesn’t even remember who I am.”

Lucifer shook his head. “The hatred for her miserable world is a front for the older, blacker hatred for you.” He poked Cam in the chest. “When a soul is hurt as deeply as Lilith, the pain is permanent. Even if she no longer recognizes your face, she recognizes your soul. The core of who you are.” Lucifer spat on the floor. “And she loathes you.”

Cam winced. It couldn’t be true. But then he remembered how cold she’d been to him. “I’ll fix her.”

“Sure you will,” Lucifer said, nodding. “Give it a try.”

“And after I win her back,” Cam asked, “then what?”

Lucifer smiled patronizingly. “You’ll be free to live out the rest of her mortal days with her. Happily ever after. Is that what you want to hear?” He snapped his fingers as if he’d just remembered something. “You asked about the catch.”

Cam waited. His wings burned with the need to fly to Lilith.

“I have indulged you too much for too long,” Lucifer said, suddenly cold and serious. “*When you fail*, you must return to where you belong. Here, with me. No more galivanting through the galaxies. No more white in your wings.” Lucifer narrowed his blood-red eyes. “You will join me behind the Wall of Darkness, on my right-hand side. Eternally.”

Cam eyed the devil evenly. Thanks to Luce and Daniel, Cam had an opportunity—he could rewrite his fate. How could he give that up again so easily?

Then he thought of Lilith. Of the despair she'd wallowed in for millennia.

No. He couldn't entertain what it would mean to lose. He would focus on winning her love and easing her pain. If there was any hope of saving her, it was worth everything to try.

"Agreed," Cam said, and held out his hand.

Lucifer swiped it away. "Save that crap for Daniel. I don't need a handshake to hold you to your word. You'll see."

"Fine," Cam said. "How do I get back to her?"

"Take the door to the left of the hot-dog-on-a-stick stand." Lucifer pointed at the row of vendors, which were now far in the distance. "Once you set foot in Crossroads, the countdown begins."

Cam was already moving toward the door, toward Lilith. But as he passed out of Hell's food court, Lucifer's voice seemed to follow him.

"Just fifteen days, old boy. Tick-tock!"



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is the internationally bestselling author of the *Teardrop* and the *Fallen* series. Her books have been translated into more than thirty languages. She lives in Los Angeles.

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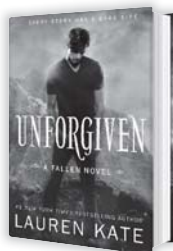
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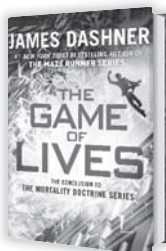
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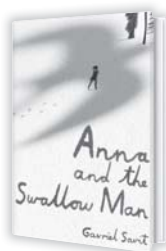
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